

2019 Submission - Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System

Organisation Name

Friends for Good Incorporated

Name

Ms Patricia Lauria

What are your suggestions to improve the Victorian community's understanding of mental illness and reduce stigma and discrimination?

"Research has shown that if people subjectively judge that they do not have enough meaningful social connections and are lonely this can be directly related to a whole range of health issues, including serious mental health issues. These health outcomes can include depression, anxiety, heart disease, early onset of dementia and in some cases premature death. Quality of life is greatly affected, we see more visits to hospital emergency departments and to GP's. The prevalence of loneliness in Victoria is not only difficult to judge given it is a subjective measure, but there is a dearth of longitudinal research into this problem. From the small studies that have been carried out loneliness has been shown to be a significant problem. Friends for Good has conducted a recent on-line survey, Time we Talked. This survey of 1745 Australians represents a snapshot of this problem in the community. As part of its distribution it was sent to seniors by the Victorian Government. Acknowledging that there were limitations in reaching older seniors as it was an on-line survey, it none-the-less provided an insight into the mental health of people in the community, particularly as there was collection of qualitative responses. It paints an extremely sad picture with the majority of people describing lonely lives, devoid of enough quality connections with others. The following are some examples provided about the loneliness experienced by respondents: the loss of partners and family leaving them isolated, stating that they had suffered from loneliness for their whole lives, speaking about mental and physical health problems that stop them from participating in the community and for some, saying that the only way out of loneliness is to die. Given the stigma that surrounds loneliness there is an urgent need for a public awareness campaign that seeks to break down the barriers that prevent people from identifying that they suffer from loneliness. Community education about loneliness and social isolation, the serious health consequences that can result if they are not overcome and the need to seek out more connections is required. Considerable resources have been directed to community education about depression and anxiety and Friends for Good applauds this critical work. Loneliness, on the other hand, has been neglected to the detriment of a large portion of the population, the community at large and the Victorian health system. Friends for Good would welcome the opportunity to participate in discussions about how this critical work may be progressed. "

What is already working well and what can be done better to prevent mental illness and to support people to get early treatment and support?

"Friends for Good has established Friend Line, a free telephone service for anyone who would like to call and have a chat with a friendly volunteer. Currently operation hours are three evenings a week from 6-8 pm. Ideally, with sufficient resources, this urgently needs to be greatly extended. The service targets people who are socially isolated or lonely, or those who would like to prevent themselves from becoming so. It also offers referrals to other community services and social groups to assist callers to become more socially connected. If ever we were unsure about whether loneliness exists or if it is causing distress to people, Friend Line has dispelled all myths.

In every session we hear from people who speak of the anguish of being lonely. Examples of their circumstances include: the 92 year old grandfather that family has forgotten, the man that has been housebound for 11 months due to serious physical injuries and reads the bible for company, the person that locks themselves in their house for days at a time, the caller who does not have a meaningful conversation with anyone else. There are hundreds more profiles too numerous to list here. Friend Line receives calls from people from all walks of life, socio-economic backgrounds and ages. Some of the callers have comorbidities. They have a broad range of mental health problems and mental illnesses including social anxiety, depression, Asperger's, hoarding, addiction to drugs, alcohol and gambling, psychosis and schizophrenia.. Friend Line is one element of working with those experiencing loneliness and social isolation to support them. Friend Line is a service staffed by volunteers. In effect people being prepared to form a connection with others in the community who reach out for support. Friends for Good has received hundreds of applications from people who would like to volunteer as call takers on Friend Line. Many of these people identify as being lonely and would like to volunteer as a way of being more socially connected. Volunteering with Friend Line is therefore intrinsically related to the issue of loneliness and is a way of both providing a service and a pathway out of loneliness for community members on either end of the phone. Friends for Good strongly advocates for additional services, particularly in the preventative space, that can be developed and delivered by volunteers with appropriate training and support to help address the issue of loneliness. Prevention is the key to ensuring that community members do not become chronically lonely and develop more serious mental illnesses. As Friend Line operates in the preventative space we spend considerable time talking with callers about what is happening to them and in their lives and encouraging them to seek help should they require it, providing details of relevant services. Therefore, in a non-threatening way we are able to support early intervention. Many callers to Friend Line report that they feel a sense of human connection with the call takers because they are not health workers, counsellors and psychologists. They describe that never getting to know a worker' as a person is de-humanising. Acknowledging the important ethical considerations in the provision of professional service and boundaries that must be drawn, it is also important to acknowledge that different types of service provision, such as Friend Line that is informal, friendly and neighbourly has a critical role to play. We need both and we need to work together. "

What is already working well and what can be done better to prevent suicide?

"Many callers to Friend Line are now telling us that this service is invaluable to them and that they feel like they have a sense of belonging, feel safer and more connected to the outside world. Some callers have expressed that they don't know where they would be without the service, that they have had suicidal thoughts in the past and still struggle with them now. Many comments are made to the effect that you people keep me sane and [before I contacted Friend Line] I thought we were the people that society had forgotten. We are now regularly contacted by people on remote farming properties who do not have any other social connection and the combination of social isolation and loneliness is extremely problematic for them. It is too early to tell whether Friend Line is definitely playing a role in suicide prevention, as it has only been operating for one year and an evaluation of its impact has not been carried out. However, there are many indications that this is highly likely to be the case. Friends for Good intends to carry out an evaluation of the Friend Line service commencing in September 2019. If this does prove to be a successful suicide prevention strategy it will add weight to community based solutions proving to be effective strategies. "

What makes it hard for people to experience good mental health and what can be done to improve this? This may include how people find, access and experience mental health treatment and support and how services link with each other.

"There are significant gaps in current programs and supports for people who are socially isolated and lonely. Friends for Good acknowledges and applauds the work of community organisations, governments and individuals in the community who provide a range of programs and supports that prevent many people from becoming lonely. However, given the consistent and growing demand for Friend Line services and testimony from the callers themselves, it is obvious that people are falling through the cracks. It is clear that we need new and/or different ways to reach people, additional resources for existing services, as many are over-subscribed and a better understanding of what supports are most successful, according to the community members themselves. In particular, Friends for Good has identified that there are insufficient services that are effective in preventing loneliness and social isolation. Callers to Friend Line often remark that they have frequently called crisis lines in the past and found them to be inadequate because they do not have sufficient time to speak with people who are feeling lonely. Often callers also say that if only someone would talk to them they would not become suicidal. In addition, the vast majority of callers are adamant that loneliness should not by default always be considered a mental illness. When they hear media stories about loneliness they are referred to crisis lines or services helping people with depression. Yet they may not be or identify as having a mental illness or being depressed. As a community we therefore need to improve our messaging. If people are feeling lonely or socially isolated, we need to refer them to services designed to prevent them becoming chronically lonely and potentially developing a mental illness. At the same time some people may need more intensive support already. We therefore need to have a broader scope of services included when we provide information about these issues. "

What are the drivers behind some communities in Victoria experiencing poorer mental health outcomes and what needs to be done to address this?

N/A

What are the needs of family members and carers and what can be done better to support them?

N/A

What can be done to attract, retain and better support the mental health workforce, including peer support workers?

N/A

What are the opportunities in the Victorian community for people living with mental illness to improve their social and economic participation, and what needs to be done to realise these opportunities?

"As our regular callers to Friend Line have gained confidence many have suggested a range of other strategies and programs that they believe would be effective. Based on this feedback from callers, research into services in other countries and the experience of Friends for Good volunteers (who have worked with people experiencing loneliness in the past), Friends for Good have designed a range of potential new services that could be introduced. Some of these will be trialled over the coming months. Others require a significant investment of funds. Friends for Good would welcome the opportunity to discuss these with the Commission and to explore ways of

establishing them in partnership with other service providers."

Thinking about what Victorias mental health system should ideally look like, tell us what areas and reform ideas you would like the Royal Commission to prioritise for change?

"Friends for Good would like the Commission to prioritise the prevention of mental illness by recommending support for, and the extension of the development of services targeted to, people in the community who are experiencing social isolation and loneliness. These types of services have the potential to provide cost effective safety nets for people experiencing, or those likely to develop, debilitating mental illnesses."

What can be done now to prepare for changes to Victorias mental health system and support improvements to last?

N/A

Is there anything else you would like to share with the Royal Commission?

N/A